

Reading Mercury 9th July 1932

**AN 18th CENTURY CRAFTSMAN.
Stained Glass by John Rowell.**

**LOCAL MEMORIALS OF HIS SKILL.
By AMBROSE HEAL.**

Two hundred years ago, "John Rowell of Wycomb in Buckinghamshire" Issued a finely engraved trade-card. of imposing dimensions, announcing that he performed "The Ancient Art of Staining of Glass with all the colours Reviv'd . . . He also by Approv'd Engines Raises Water from great Depth, or Distances, in an Easy and cheap manner, and (if requir'd) maintains them yearly for a small Consideration." The "approv'd engines" figure on his card as pumps, manned by plump cherubs and spouting forth decorative fountains while at the head of the engraving another group of cherubs, borne aloft on fleecy clouds, display cartoons for stained glass windows. A dated sundial fixes the year of this innovative design as 1733, The only known copy of this trade-card is in the Bodleian Library (Douce collection Adds. Vol. 138, No, 110),

It is evident that John Rowell was a plumber and glazier with a soul above pumps and plain glazing. In these days, when much is talked of the need for closer co-operation between art and commerce, it is good to see that this simple craftsman developed the artistic side of his glazier's business that he became an artist of repute who enjoyed high patronage. His painted windows are to be found in half-a-dozen counties, but his home town of Wycombe contains no memorial to his name.

STARTED BUSINESS IN WYCOMBE.

John Rowell, as we gather from one of his advertisements, must have started business in Wycombe about 1715. In an earlier advertisement which he inserted in the "London Journal." January 27th. 1732, and in "The Craftsman," February 3rd of the same year, he tells us that he had already executed important commissions for stained-glass windows at Apethorpe for the Earl of Westmoreland, at Newnham and at Hambleton, this last to the order of Dr. Scawen Kenrick. As indicating the type of work which had been entrusted to him this advertisement is worth repeating verbatim:-

**"THE ANCIENT ART
OF STAINING OF GLASS.**

With all the Colours. Reviv'd and Perform'd by JOHN ROWELL at Wycomb, in Buckinghamshire. A specimen of which may be seen at: Epethorpe in Northamptonshire, four miles from Oundle and six miles from Stanford; where (at the charge of the Right Hon. the Earl of WESTMORLAND) he hath lately made and set up a Chancel-Window, representing our Lord Jesus Christ Instituting the Sacrament to the Twelve Apostles: And also hath repaired an Ancient Window in the said Church, that was much defaced, which represented The Fall of Man, the Sufferings of Christ, his Triumphant Resurrection, and the Last Judgment; it appears to be done in the Year 1621, when a rich and curious Monument was erected to the Memory of that honourable Family. He likewise hath set up, (at the Charge of the Rev. Dr. HUTCHINSON of Hammersmith) a Chancel Window at Newnham In Hampshire, near Basingstoke, representing tho History of Our Lord Jesus Christ made known to his Two Disciples at Emmaus: He also hath set up a Chancel Window for the Reverend Dr. Kenrick, at Hambleton, In Buckinghamshire, near Henly upon Thames; which History is of our Lord's Resurrection Triumphant over Death and the Grave; the Figures are above five Feet high; He also hath made and set up, at his House at Wycomb, a large Window of Stain'd Glass, representing the Birth of Christ attended by the Shepherds; the Figures are as large as the Life. And for the Encouragement of the said Art, performs it very reasonable, having a Son that (tis hoped) will survive him. He also makes Sun-Dials and Coats or Arms in the said Stain'd Glass, and repairs any Ancient Work in that Art"

ANCIENT ART REVIVED.

Rowell's claim to have revived the colours used in "the ancient art of staining glass" refers to the fact that for nearly 70 years after the overthrow of the Lorraine glass workers by Louis XIII, in 1636, fine coloured glass had been unobtainable. Just how far he was successful in reproducing the qualities of the old glass seems doubtful, as Horace Walpole, in his "Anecdotes of Painting in England," tells us that "Rowell's colours soon vanished," though he goes on to say that he found out a very durable and beautiful red, but he died in a year or two and the secret with him." Later experts have said that Walpole did him less than justice and that his colouring was not so ephemeral as the above statement would have us believe.

In the same year in which the above quoted advertisement appeared, Rowell executed an elaborate piece of heraldic glass for the Hall family in the church at Harpsden in Oxfordshire. This window bears the inscription "1732, John Rowell, Wycomb, Bucks, Fecit." Coates, writing in 1802, in his "History of Reading" describes the arms emblazoned on this window and adds that "the red is almost gone, but the gold colour is fine." From a later advertisement, date 1744, we find that Rowell had carried out work at Whitfield, near Thame; at Arborfield, in Berkshire -- where he put in a two-light window over the altar representing Moses and Aaron with the Tables of the Law -- and in the chancel window of Penn Church (Bucks), Christ appearing to the two disciples at Emmaus. This last was no doubt in the brick chancel erected in 1736, and it was probably demolished in 1865, when extensive "restorations" were carried out by the first Earl Howe. Coates, in his description of the Arborfield window, says "the colours of the drapery are crimson, blue and purple, all very rich -- the breast plate at Aaron is remarkably brilliant."

CELEBRATED CLIENTS.

Among other works executed by Rowell, to which it has not been possible to fix any approximate dates, were many pieces carried out for Dr. Maddox, Bishop of Worcester. One of these at Hartlebury was the Passion in the Garden, after the design by Dr. John Wall, of Worcester, but Dr. Wall does not seem to have been satisfied with the rendering or it and considered that his design had been "strangely altered in the execution." Rowell also numbered among his clients the Duke of Richmond -- for whom he worked at Goodwood -- Henry, Earl of Pembroke -- called "the architect earl," of whom Walpole spoke as "a second Inigo Jones" -- and Sir Henry Englefield, who commissioned an armorial piece. Two more examples of his work are traceable, both of which were purchased from Rowell's widow. One entitled, "Caritas Romana," was secured by Viscount Fane and the other a two-light window of the "Nativity" and the "Adoration of the Shepherds," which was bought by Mr. Chute for his historic house, "The Vyne," near Basingstoke. This last was originally in Rowell's house at Wycombe and is referred to in the advertisement previously quoted dated 1733. This window is illustrated in Le Couteur's "English Mediaeval Painted Glass."

For the record of one other piece of work we are indebted to an article in the "Gentleman's Magazine," October, 1758, signed by Edgar Bochart. This article gives a lively description of "a water serpent of uncommon size" that took up its abode in a pond belonging to a farm-house near Hitchendon (Hughenden). The farmer's wife, being alarmed by the monster, caused it to be shot. Overcome with remorse she had the skin stuffed with hay, and for many years it hung outside the house. All this occurred in 1578, and ever since, so the writer avers, the story of this visitation was kept alive by a painting on the walls or the refectory of the house. From time to time the painting was renewed, and the last time this was done --about 1720-- it was carried out by "the famous Rowell - the glass stainer." Some clue to the position of the farm is given by the writer, who says that it stood about half a mile above Hughenden Church and was formerly a hospital of the Knights Templars. Bochart admits that he was inclined at first to doubt this fable, but came to the conclusion that it was "in every respect true from the traditional accounts of sensible judicious people hereabouts and from the pencill'd record of it on the wall of the house."

FAMILY HISTORY.

An endeavour has been made to establish the antecedents of John Rowell by reference to the parish registers. The Rowells were well established in High Wycombe by the end of the seventeenth century, and, so far as it has been possible to identify John Rowell's branch of the family, it appears that he was the son of Robert Rowell, joiner, and his wife Hannah, and that he was baptised on December 14th, 1694. Evidently his marriage took place in some other parish, but baptisms of the children of "John Rowell and Mary his wife" appear in the Wycombe registers between the years 1713 and 1721. His wife Mary bore him six children, most of whom died in infancy, and she died in 1734. In 1739 he made a second marriage at Wycombe with Margaret House. We know that by his first wife he had a son Francis, though no record is found of a baptism in that name, for, in the advertisement previously quoted of 1733, he alludes to his son "that 'tis hoped will survive him," and in another advertisement in the "Reading Mercury," December 24th, 1744, we find that owing to the death of his son Francis he is disposing of his premises at Wycombe .

"To be LETT (with or without the Furniture)

A Good House fitted for the Occupations of a Plumber, Glazier, and Painter, at High Wycomb in Buckinghamshire, (occasion'd by the Decease of Francis the Son of John Rowell) with all proper Tools and Conveniences to the same, it having been the former Residence for near Thirty Years, and where the said Occupations were carried on by JOHN ROWELL, the Performer of several large Pieces of History, &c. in Stained Glass in several Church Windows; particularly at Apethorp In Northamptonshire. Newnham in Hampshire, Penn In Buckinghamshire, Hambleton near Henly upon Thames, Whitfield near Thame, and at Arborfield In Berkshire. Enquire at the House, or of the said John Rowell at Reading."

It will be seen from the above that John Rowell had already removed to Reading, having left the Wycombe business to be carried on by his son. According to Man's "History of Reading" (published in 1816), John Rowell died in that town at his house in London Street and was "succeeded in the business of a plumber by the late Mr, Truss who had been his apprentice in that branch, but the art of staining glass, so far as was peculiar to himself, died with him. Mr. Truss had a very good portrait of Mr. Rowell, said to be a striking likeness, but by whom drawn is uncertain." This uncertainty we can now dispel for in the British Museum there is a drawing which is inscribed "John Rowell Plumber and Glass Painter of Reading, Berks - extremely like J. Weller, delin." John Weller, "limner of Reading," was the subject of a poem by the "the poet Cole," which was printed in Man's "History of Reading."

A TOPICAL INTEREST.

John Rowell has a certain topical interest for us at the present moment, when the remains at the Roman villa on Penn's Mead at Wycombe are being uncovered. At the time when the villa was first excavated, in 1724, Rowell was employed by a local draper, Mr. John Bates, to make a drawing of the mosaic pavement which decorated the principal apartment. This drawing was mentioned by E. J. Payne in a paper which he read before the Bucks Archaeological Society in 1864 (Bucks Records, Vol. iii, pp. 160-164). A memorandum concerning it is to be found in the Delafield MSS. in the Bodleian Library. It reads as follows:-- "Mr. John Bates, draper of this place (a gentleman of good understanding and publick spirit) ordered a copy of it after the original to be taken, which he had painted on a canvas footcloth and served for many years as an occasional carpet for his parlour. I have seen it many a time and as far as I can remember, it was diversified into a great variety or work in small squares, and the middle set off with the form of a perfect wild beast."

Thomas Delafield was curate of Fingest for many years, from 1726 onwards, and amassed much information relating to local history. In the excavations which are now being carried on the particular pavement above described has not yet been discovered, nor was it found during the excavations which were made in 1864. It would be the more interesting therefore, if John Rowell's drawing, which apparently was a full-size cartoon could be traced.

Ambrose Heal, 9th July 1932